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Will They Be DANCING In The Seats?!?

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WHETHER YOU SEE them as the artform of the '80s or out-and-out promos, there's no denying the enormous impact that music videos have had on motion pictures, TV and records.

To varying degrees, the phenomenal success of such diverse "product" as "Purple Rain," "Miami Vice" and even Michael Jackson, is largely attributable to the increasing popularity of these three to four minute musical shorts, which have tapped into the consciousness of the 14-24 age group.

Curiously enough, however, although this is the same demographic group that makes up the bulk of the theatrical audience, very little has been done to exploit the potential of exhibiting music videos in the theatre.

What's the problem? According to Music Motions' president Tom Hayes, whose New York-based firm has been in the business of distributing video clips to theatres for about a year-and-a-half now, "The bottom line is that corporate sponsorship is needed in order to make the whole operation economically feasible, but sponsorship is still a very touchy subject among exhibitors."

In an effort to surmount this problem, Hayes, who adds that "We don't want to put commercials in theatres, we want to bring them entertainment," decided to initiate a program of corporate sponsorship using what he describes as "a very soft-sell."

For Music Motions, this initial use of a national sponsor entailed a rather unique arrangement whereby Eastman Kodak provided them with about 4,000 prints of a 35mm Dolby Stereo clip of Mick Jagger and David Bowie performing "Dancing In The Street." These clips, which contained a brief appeal for financial support for Live Aid's famine relief efforts, were then distributed, free of charge, to various theatres across the nation.

Of course, in addition to Kodak's sponsorship, the Live Aid tie-in is really the hook that's facilitated "Dancing In The Street's" unusually wide release. For as Hayes himself admits, "Prior to that it was a few hundred here and there, and before that, we were renting. But because the exhibitors didn't want to pay, we were forced to look for sponsors."

Unlike Music Motions, which began by trying to rent clips to theatres, Nashville-based Music Cinema started out with a decidedly different approach. As company head Mike Castle tells it: "When Stuart (Harnell) and I got involved in this business a couple of years ago, we began by working through record companies to whom we'd sell time in the theatre and the theatre was paid whenever plugs were used.

"Later on, we signed with an outfit called Concert Cinema and became the distributor of their product. They went directly to the artist and bought the theatrical distribution rights, got an advertiser to put a tag on it and paid the theatre. Then, when Concert Cinema left the scene because of the difficulty of getting advertisers, we continued working with the record labels, but are still trying to figure out a way to make this work for everyone involved."

Once again, the main problems that Castle points to have to do with both exhibitor resistance to "hard-sell advertising" and their reluctance to pay for music videos, which are often perceived as "just another kind of ad."

On the other hand, it is Tom Hayes' contention that music videos can provide the exhibitor with an all important "edge." "Exhibitors are in the business of promoting entertainment," says Hayes, "and one of the ways you do this is by getting as much publicity as possible. And because music videos appeal to moviegoers on a whole other level, they can give the exhibitor a real edge whenever there's a choice involved. Then, too," Hayes adds, "cross-plugs from radio stations and local record stores can also help the theatre."

Besides "Dancing In The Street," Music Motions is also offering a wide range of music "zaps" by such performers as Kool & The Gang, Sade and A-Ha. "The record companies are now sending videos directly to us," explains Hayes, "and we decide if they're appropriate based on how broad their appeal is in both music and content."

Still, as Denise Battaglia, the company's v.p. of sales and marketing reiterates, "The direction that we're moving in is toward full national sponsorship, which will enable us to make our zaps free to all exhibitors."

Among other developments, Battaglia is particularly enthused about her firm's impending involvement in the distribution of music zaps to some 800 screens in England and another 400 in Canada. Additionally, Battaglia says that Music Motions is currently working on deals which would cover such territories as India, Japan, Australia, France, West Germany and Israel.

Looking at this whole phenomenon from an entirely different perspective, Tom Royer, American Multi-Cinema's vice president of national advertising and marketing, told BOXOFFICE that "We've done a lot of experimenting with music videos, but we don't have anything going with them now."

For Royer, "It's only of value when it's programmed to the right features and when the public knows that a particular clip's going to be there at a specific time. In other words, it's opening up a whole bunch of advertising and marketing related problems which have yet to be solved."

One possible solution to some of these problems was suggested by Hayes, who says that Music Motions always asks theatres to announce specific video presentations on their telephone tapes and to use ad tags which identify clips, in print.

Be that as it may, when Royer was asked about the trend toward sponsorship, his comment that "We're extremely hesitant about sponsorship because of the public's trepidation with regard to advertising in the theatre," seemed to succinctly sum up the main stumbling block to exhibitors' acceptance of music videos as an meaningful part of the exhibition process.

However, if the folks at Music Motions are right, it's quite possible that low-profile advertising by film-related sponsors (such as Kodak) can help to make the screening of music clips in the theatre work to everyone's advantage. ■